

ISOJ 2023: Day 1

Keynote session: The Future of News is NOW: Adapting News to the Streaming Age

Chair: [David Ryfe](#), professor and director, **School of Journalism and Media, UT Austin**

- Keynote speaker: [Janelle Rodriguez](#), executive vice president, **NBC News**
-

David Ryfe I am so excited to be here this morning and evening or afternoon depending on where you are around the world. Janelle Rodriguez is the executive vice president, as Mallery mentioned, of *NBC News*. Under her portfolio includes *NBC* “Nightly News with Lester Holt”, *NBC* streaming service News NOW, and breaking news. So she has a very big job, and so we're very grateful to have her come and speak with us. I can imagine in the back of her head she has meetings being logged that she's not attending right now. Before she came to *NBC* in 2015, she was also executive vice president of programming at *CNN*. I'm not going to bore you with her entire... you can see her Wikipedia page, if you like, and see more information about Janelle than you can imagine. But I thought we'd start with a short video from *NBC News* just showing the streaming service.

Video Transcript This is what it looks like and feel of storms... A bigger piece of the puzzle... Here's some of the stories we're watching tonight... We begin with breaking news just coming in... Russia has launched another round of attacks... What was it like when you came back and saw your neighborhood like this?... They say that in modern war there aren't any front lines anymore, well here there certainly are... Extreme weather tonight on both the West Coast and the East Coast... We've had some of the strongest winds here... How many of you were up here? At least like 11... Now the economy as Americans face the highest inflation rate in decades... How does this all impact your wallet?... He is now the first president, former or otherwise, ever charged with a crime... What do we know at this point and what it means to have this case going on alongside a campaign?... Can voters trust that you will be able to do this job?... Why should voters believe you? This special election night... We love it. We live for this... We have a substantial team of *NBC News* correspondents fanned out... This is the first time we've not been able to call control of the House on election night... Tonight, we'll take an unflinching look at the resurgence of anti-Semitism in America... They're waiting until Title 42 is lifted before they decide whether to cross into the United States... What made you decide to go the medicinal healing route for what you're growing here?... Who should be accountable? The city points the finger at the state, the state of the city... So more breaking news... We are live on the ground there... I want to show you an up-close look at what we're talking about here... The news continues right now.

David Ryfe Wow. That's amazing. That's a really interesting video. Welcome Janelle.

Janelle Rodriguez Thank you so much.

David Ryfe And now we get to see one another on the screen in front of us, which is not going to be disorienting at all. I was super excited when I learned that I was going to get to have a conversation with you today, partly because my academic background is in

newspapers, particularly regional newspapers. You hear a lot of... there's a lot of attention paid to the plight of the newspaper industry and public media, and about what's happening in that industry. But we actually don't hear a whole lot about what's happening with network evening news in the public media; although for decades, the network evening news has been a staple of our news system. It's been one of the primary places people get their news. And in fact, my understanding is that the "NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt" is celebrating its 75th anniversary. That's how long that news program has been around. Yet we don't hear a whole lot about it. So I thought just as a kind of icebreaker question, maybe you could give us your sense of the lay of the land in the network TV news industry, today. What are the challenges facing this industry? What are the opportunities facing this industry? What are the stay to play in this industry today?

Janelle Rodriguez Yeah. First of all, thank you for having me. It's an incredible honor. I'm not sure if the mic is on. OK. So first of all, thank you. Thank you again for having me. It's an incredible honor to be here with you guys. It's incredible conference.

It's a big question, right? The state of network news and... Technical difficulties, and the first thing you learn about doing live news is you've got to keep going and don't ever fumble. But to your question, so I want to say again, thank you — make sure everybody can hear me. It's an incredible honor to be here with you guys today. There's a lot of big questions, right, facing not just network news, but journalism in general, and I'm really excited to be able to jump into all of those topics with you. To me, there's two fundamental existential questions facing all of us. One is the question of journalism, how we do our journalism, and what the resources are to be focused on quality, reliable, trustworthy journalism, whether it's here in the United States or other places in the world. And then there are these questions of distribution. Used to be you'd have three big networks, your strong local newspaper system, and that's where the majority of Americans got their news was either from the three networks or from their local newspapers. We've seen, as you referenced, a lot of local newspapers being decimated and going under, which leaves a vacuum on that level. That's where the national networks bear, I think, a larger responsibility.

In terms of the journalism, let's start there. I think for the purpose of this conference and the purposes of what we do, that is what we wake up thinking about every day. We're talking about like our morning editorial meetings and where we focus first thing in the morning. The journalism has got to be at the heart of everything, and so that's where we focus. We're lucky enough that we have reporters across the country, around the globe, literally every single day to do that frontline firsthand reporting. You've got to be on the ground to be able to do that kind of journalism. Then there are the questions of distribution. As you mentioned, "Nightly News" is about to celebrate our 75th year on the air. We have these incredible iconic brands like the "Today Show", "Nightly News", "Meet the Press", and literally millions of people are still tuning in every single day, both in the morning for the "Today Show" and in the evening for "Nightly News" to watch. People are now really changing their habits. There are so many different ways to access news and information beyond the three networks. So it's critical for us — and that's what we've placed a high priority on — to make sure that we're distributing that journalism everywhere that our audience is. I mean, we have a robust digital operation NBCNews.com, but we also launched six years ago a digital-only program called "Stay Tuned" that's really focused on reaching younger viewers where they are, and that was on Snapchat. From there we launched our streaming network, *NBC News*, now about four years ago, where we've seen just exponential growth.

David Ryfe Absolutely. As you think about the streaming service, my understanding is that that's been one of the highest growing in terms of audience for *NBC News* over the last several years. As you were in those initial conversations about the streaming service, I'm wondering, what was the case for streaming news? What was the business case? What was the journalistic case? How do you create value — economic value — out of streaming news?

Janelle Rodriguez Yeah. I mean, in terms of why did we do it to begin with... Part of it is just seeing where the audiences are and knowing that we had to step into that space to reach people. It starts with the cord-nevers (and) the cord-cutters. So we started there. Let's get into the space. It wasn't a focus on how do we make money potentially in this area, but really about we're already doing a ton of journalism every day so how do we get that out there to the audiences. What we found very quickly is that there is a massive audience out there. I think there's a misconception, particularly when it comes to young people, that young people aren't as interested in the news. That is simply not true, and we find that every step of the way, which is if you are able to bring that premium high-level journalism to where people are consuming it, then the demand is as high as ever. It's just really about being where the audience is.

David Ryfe And so, is it a model of scarcity? If the audience is online and you started to meet them online, did the audience for the nightly news begin to dip because of that, or is it more of an abundance model where the more news people consume, then the more news they consume?

Janelle Rodriguez I think it's a lot of the more they consume, then the more they consume. So as a separate matter, I'll just take "Nightly News with Lester Holt", for example. So "Nightly" airs across all of our *NBC* affiliates at 6:30 ET every night, sometimes 7:00, depending on the market that you're in. If you're 20-something years old, there may be no amount of marketing or great journalism that we're going to do to get somebody to sit down and watch "Nightly News" at a certain time on the network. Right? There are still millions of people who do that, but there's a certain amount of the audience that they're just not going to come there. This is separate from our streaming platform; Several years ago, we started putting "Nightly" on YouTube to see what the audience demand was there. We're getting about a million viewers a day for "Nightly" just on YouTube. That audience... It's not that we're cannibalizing the network audience. That audience is watching "Nightly News" on YouTube. They're just not going to be watching on the network. So it's the more is more model.

David Ryfe So in terms of... I assume that the streaming services and the YouTube service is still an advertising-supported service. You know, newspapers have not had a particular success going online with advertising. There doesn't seem to be an advertising model for print, (say) for newspapers online. I'm wondering if that's less true for video news because it's easier to wrap advertising through the videos.

Janelle Rodriguez Yeah. I mean, I would say... I'll stay out of the print question because that's not my area of expertise and I know they're obviously having huge challenges with display ads and stuff. But when it comes to... will take streaming and even when you're looking at YouTube as a separate matter. A lot of people, I think, have the misconception when we talk about streaming, they think it's a mobile play, but it is not a mobile play. Our show, "Stay Tuned", which is on Snapchat, is a mobile play. But on streaming, we're finding 90% of our audience is watching on a TV set — a traditional TV set — and you find that YouTube — as a separate matter again — is increasingly becoming a huge network of

choice in and of itself that people are watching on a television set. So when it comes to the ad market, if you're advertiser x, does it really matter if that ad is running via a cable network, a traditional network or a streaming network, if the audience experience is watching it on a big glass TV/people sitting at home watching it. So it's just a completely different dynamic around ad supported. Then as it relates to ad-supported versus subscription models for us... I think this is really a question that is bigger and plays into these questions of democracy and civil society. I don't think we can live in a world where you have two tiers of information: people who can afford to pay get access to quality information and journalism, and people who can't afford to pay end up with junk information, misinformation, and low quality. So for us at *NBC* and Cesar Conde, who's chairman of *NBC News*, this has been one of our core values. We do have certain things that are subscription-based products, but for the most part, *NBC News* and our legacy and our future is about providing free, high-quality journalism. Now, it costs a lot of money to have correspondents fanned out across the globe every single day, right? So you got to fund that from somewhere, and in this case, the ad-based model is how we do that.

David Ryfe Yeah. So that's really striking to me because in the newspaper world, that's not true.

Janelle Rodriguez In the newspaper world, they're all going behind the paywall, and again, this gets back to the question of who gets access to high-quality journalism. Is it going to be a world of haves or have-nots? While the purists in us as journalists are like, well, we don't want anything to do with the business of this, it does cost money to fund all of these things. So either you're going to go behind a paywall or you're talking about an ad-supported model.

David Ryfe Do you still consider yourself a mass medium?

Janelle Rodriguez I mean that depends on how you define mass medium, but literally, we're servicing tens of millions of people a day accessing what we do.

David Ryfe So I ask that because it sounds like you're still committed to the idea of providing free news to any consumer who is interested in the news. The newspaper folks, they don't have that... you could say they don't have that luxury. The advertising just isn't there anymore for them. I mean, even *The New York Times* makes more money through subscriptions than it does through advertising now.

I wonder whether it's... two different kinds of questions. We were talking backstage about having to reorganize the journalists working for *NBC News* to take best advantage of this new model where what they report will be distributed across multiple platforms, and in the past, they were more relatively siloed to different shows. I wonder if you could speak for just a second about any new training or how did you talk to the reporters and convince them that this was the best path forward?

Janelle Rodriguez It actually didn't take a ton of convincing, but you're right. If you rewind even, let's say ten years ago at most networks, the correspondents would be focused on the morning show or the evening show and that was the premium play for them. We have multiple networks just at *NBC* alone; in addition to streaming and the "Today Show" and "Nightly", we have *MSNBC*, *CNN*, *CNBC*, *Telemundo*, and we have a print operation. So at any given moment, we're up across multiple networks live feeding out in addition to our text operation, which happens through *NBCNews.com*. For our correspondents, it has widened their world significantly because in the past... I mean on "Nightly News" at the

end of the day, it's 22 minutes of content, and that's a finite amount of content. The producers have to make very tough decisions every night about what's going to make it into those 22 minutes. It used to be that if you didn't get into the evening show, your work for the day just kind of fell by the wayside. Now, they have so many different platforms to be able to tell their stories and beyond just the different ways they can get their stories out to the world, having streaming and these other mediums allows them to experiment with format and length and the way they tell their stories. So for the correspondents, sometimes I can tell you they will have brutal days where they're up at five in the morning and they're working through you know... I'm talking in Eastern Time right now, 9:00 ET. If they're in Ukraine, they would have been up all day long local time in Ukraine, And then they have to be up for the entire day and evening on the East Coast. So it can be incredibly grueling days for them at times, but usually, when that happens, it means they're in the middle of the biggest story out there. So they get the adrenaline that comes along with that.

David Ryfe Yeah. So it's not daily that they're going to have that kind of grind, but it's not unusual for them when they're in the midst of a big story to have to be reporting almost 24/7.

Janelle Rodriguez That's right. So I think for those going into journalism who think, "well, I want to be a TV journalist" and think about the glitz and glamor of having the cameras on... Well, that glitz and glamor part is about 0.1%. Most of what they do is incredibly hard work and very long days.

David Ryfe And so you've obviously been successful in growing your audience in streaming. I wonder what lessons you've learned along the way. In particular, if anything, surprised you as you went on this venture because it's relatively new to do this kind of thing. What kinds of lessons did you learn and what kinds of surprises came upon you?

Janelle Rodriguez When we first started, I literally was asked, "Hey, we have a pilot program. Can you try and figure out what our streaming strategy is going to be?" I mean, it was so early days for us that it just was a blank slate. There were a couple of things as I really dug into looking around the landscape of what was out there, what the potentials were... There were other people who were dabbling in this, certainly. But what was the right space for *NBC News*? A couple of things that I took away: number one, we have to play to our core strengths. We cannot try to be something else or a little bit of everything to everybody. Our core strength is really the journalism and the fact that we do have journalists around the country and around the globe on any given day. They can follow all of the stories, both big and small, in various communities.

Number two is our ability to be live. YouTube cannot be live in that sense. Netflix cannot be live. You have a lot of news organizations that post clips and stuff but the ability to be live is particularly... There is a strong audience demand for it when it comes to news and sports. When we look at the broader cannibalization of the media landscape, a lot of it is about the on-demand access to content. Where does it matter to be live still? I think news and sports are unique in that space. So that's where we started as a strategic point of view.

The thing that surprised me... I was surprised that most of the viewing was on the television set. I did not think it would be that high, and I also was surprised at some point that we do have a significantly younger audience than our broadcast and cable networks, on our streaming, which is not a big surprise. But one thing I was surprised about at a certain point, especially as we grew our audience significantly, there's also a big segment

of the population that is 60 plus, and those are people who cut the cord because they're retired and they're saving money. These are people who grew up watching network news. They're heavy news consumers, and they're going to streaming in huge numbers as well.

David Ryfe Yeah. So the idea that older people are print people and younger people are digital people isn't quite true now, at least not for TV news.

Janelle Rodriguez Yeah, I think that has been completely kind of shattered. Part of it is, and I think about this a lot because as we talk about these issues of distribution... If you look at the TVs being manufactured now, they're all smart TVs. It used to be, five or ten years ago, those folks watching their live news through streaming were kind of the early adopter, tech-savvy folks, typically younger people. But now with the smart TVs, it's one button. I think most we talk about... As news executives, we talk a lot about cable versus broadcast versus streaming because there are huge business implications to that. But I think increasingly for consumers, it is one button. Grandma can find her way into streaming now without knowing very much other than pushing one or two buttons on her smart TV. I think that's why people are watching so much on the television set. The pandemic certainly accelerated that trend. The access point and the barrier for entry is very low now. I think for the audience — increasingly as we go into the future — the question is not going to be about broadcast streaming or cable, it's really going to be what do I get for free and what do I have to pay for?

David Ryfe I want to get to audience questions because I know they have better questions than I do, but I'd be remiss if I didn't ask you about the topic of the day in the journalism industry, which is artificial intelligence and its potential impact on news of all kinds. So I know that you've been having internal discussions about that issue, and I wonder if you could share a little bit about how you're making meaning at the moment about the potential for AI and how it might be both a benefit and a threat to what you do?

Janelle Rodriguez Yeah, I would start with the first thing when I first discovered ChatGPT, when it first came out and I sort of played with it... My first thought was, "Somebody is going to get fired because they're going to get lazy one day and think that they can be cute and go on ChatGPT and have it write a script for them, and at some point it's going to catch up to them and they're going to get fired." So I just want to be clear for everyone, especially aspiring young journalists: plagiarism is plagiarism is plagiarism. Whether you took it from *The New York Times* and passed it off on your own or you had ChatGPT write it for you, if you then go present that as your work, that is plagiarism. So that was like kind of the first line of like, where can this get people into trouble, and I think it's using it as a shortcut.

Certainly, it's an incredibly powerful tool and it's going to change so much of what so many industries are doing, but for myself personally and as we talk about at *NBC*, we're taking a very much proceed with caution approach. We are looking at ways where there may be some efficiencies, not for the journalism, but I mean, the thing can finish coding for you. It can finish all kinds of things, and that's really interesting. But I'm really crystal clear, at least at this point in the technology chatter, ChatGPT is not a fact-checking or a fact-based technology. It is a language-learning model. Like autocorrect, its goal is to fill in words that sound the most plausible. We have no idea what it is sourcing. We have no idea what the original source material was. So to try and use ChatGPT at this point to give me facts, to me would be no different. As I talk about it with my colleagues, you're not going to go on Reddit and read some random stuff on Reddit and then go write an article as if those are true facts. Now you may go on Reddit or Wikipedia or somewhere else to get a baseline

like, “hey, somebody just died, can you spit out a bio for me real quick?” I'm sure ChatGPT would be very good at that, but you've got to go back and originally source every single data point in there.

There was a recent example, I think it was a *Washington Post* article where the reporter asked ChatGPT to name five or ten law professors who've been accused of sexual assault recently. One of the people that came back on that list had, in fact, never been accused of sexual assault. Not only did ChatGPT name this person as being accused of sexual assault, it then quoted a *Washington Post* article that didn't exist. The danger is that as a language learning model, its goal is to sound incredibly convincing with language, but that doesn't mean it's factual.

So in terms of using ChatGPT as a source, I would say absolutely not. When it comes to using it to write anything for, be wary of plagiarism is plagiarism is plagiarism. Can it do lots of cool and interesting things? Yes. But I also think very significantly about the ability of ChatGPT or other language models like that to manufacture video or manufacture audio. As news organizations, we're going to be dealing with this bombardment of false information out there and now false videos and audio recordings take it to a whole other level. So those are some of the things I think about with ChatGPT.

David Ryfe I'm gratified to hear you talk about the plagiarism piece. I don't know about the other educators in the room, but we've had two different examples this semester of students turning in stories that were written by ChatGPT. They didn't even do it very well. I mean, they could have just edited the ChatGPT to make it look like a human and they didn't and just turned it in. So we're already dealing with that issue and having to set the standard for them.

I know that there are questions in the room and there is a Google Doc where you can, if you're online, type in questions. There are two microphones, but the lights are in my eyes, so it's hard for me to see who's at each microphone. But if you have questions, you can come up to the microphone and ask or type into my Google Doc so I can see. Here comes someone.

Subbu Vincent I didn't know there was a Google Doc. Thank you for having the mic. Thank you for your views, Janelle. I'm Subbu Vincent. I run journalism and media ethics at Santa Clara University's Markkula Center. The “Meet the Press” format, since you're talking about formats and innovation... I'm not saying this right, I think it's great. Would you be open to an innovation in the meaning of the word “Meet the Press” to let the public meet the press? So “Meet the Press” as in meet the journalists in a half-hour or one-hour segment every week. But the only conversation that's going on is people who ask questions about how journalism is done, what sourcing was done, what stories didn't get aired because decisions were made... That sort of conversation where people understand journalism itself is also journalism. Would you be open to that sort of innovation? Because that's also meet the press? I don't mean to put you on the spot here, but I'm just asking.

Janelle Rodriguez Yeah, no, absolutely. I mean there's a couple of different things. There is what is on the air in our traditional network format, and in that, we're always looking to innovate and try out different ways of just being more interesting, more dynamic, and more accessible. To your point about transparency, I think transparency is critical, especially in this age of just mass disinformation in terms of letting people in on how we got the information we got, how we're doing our jobs, how we're doing our reporting. We certainly are trying to... Just speaking of “Meet the Press” specifically, there's a podcast, there's a

film festival. We're trying to get our correspondents out there constantly so that they can be in formats like this to be able to answer these questions. Because to your point, I think the more we're able to engage the audience and also just answer questions about how we do what we do, it becomes more of a dialog. I think that's what's critically important for people is that they feel like they're having a dialog, and they're part of the conversation and they're part of the reporting, and they understand how we all do what we do. Not just have a top-down, voice of God, kind of the old traditional 40 years ago model.

David Ryfe Yeah, absolutely. I think we have a question over here. Introduce yourself and then ask your question.

Fernando Yep. Hi. Thank you so much for this presentation. Fernando from NewsPack. My question is about user identity and how you manage not knowing much about your viewers on TV or cable, but what you know about them via Roku or Smart TVs, and then how you manage the engagement and the identity of folks who subscribe, like, share, comment on your YouTube platform presence.

Janelle Rodriguez So just to clarify, do you mean how do we learn who our audience is or...

Fernando Specifically how you incorporate the identity of your customer viewers into your strategy in the fact that while you're distributed across all these different platforms, some of you might know more, and some you might not know anything.

Janelle Rodriguez Yeah, I mean, a couple of things because we do reach such vast audience, I generally start from the principle of don't think about going after a niche audience per se but think about being as relevant to as many people as possible. That starts with we need to have a diverse newsroom. We need to have diversity both on air and behind the camera and in front of the camera. When I say diversity, I mean it in the broadest sense of the word, from young journalists to veteran journalists, religious diversity, geographic diversity, racial diversity, gender diversity. So we really start there. We need to have a newsroom that reflects the country. But then to your point, we know that, for example, the folks who are watching Snapchat — our show "Stay Tuned", which airs on Snapchat — the bulk of that audience is 12 to 19 years old. So the kind of reporters that we're going to have front those stories and the kind of stories we're going to choose needs to be relevant to that audience in a more significant way, which may be very different than say the kind of audience on "Nightly News", which is a much broader audience and a much older audience. So we are looking at who the audience is in a particular format and in a particular place, and trying to be reflective of that in some of the story selection. But I would say in general, the core value is you've got to have a diverse newsroom and that way you're able to think about what are the relevant topics and issues in different communities in a way that's both organic and relevant.

David Ryfe So we could sit here and talk for the next few hours, but we have time for one more question. We're going to do it over here on the right.

Audience Member Hi. I have a question. So how do you see AI as interfering with the fact-checking process for your articles?

Janelle Rodriguez I don't see it as interfering, per se, but I just go back to we can't confuse a sophisticated language model with fact-checking. So as far as I'm concerned, AI has no place in fact-checking because we have no idea, there is zero transparency as to

where ChatGPT is pulling its information from. It's not built to be fact-based; it's built to be language relevant. So that still has to be done the old-fashioned way, like reporters need to pick up the phone and call their sources and go to the ground and see with their eyes and report what they see. I think a human editor needs to sit down and question them and make sure that their sources are there and their facts are there and they have the story correct. I don't think that can be outsourced to machines.

David Ryfe Well, thank you so much. It's been so, so fun to spend 30 to 45 minutes with you. Can you help me thank Janelle for coming and spending some of her day with us?